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Blood

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[title page]

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ETHNOLOGY.

—*Self-torture in the Blood Indian sun dance.*[1]

U. S. National Museum.

JOHN C. EWERS,

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When George Catlin, the artist and Indian enthusiast, published (1841) the first graphic account of the practice of self-torture in a Plains Indian ceremony, which he had witnessed in 1832, his description was termed fantastic by D. D. Mitchell, Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Apparently shocked by Catlin's vivid portrayal of coolly premeditated self-sacrifice of human flesh and blood by participants in the Okipa ceremony of the Mandan,

[1] Received January 30, 1948.

Mitchell declared, "The scenes described by Catlin, existed almost entirely in the fertile imagination of that gentleman" (Schoolcraft, vol. 3, p. 254; Catlin, vol. 1, pp. 157–177).

Catlin's description was substantiated, however, some years before Mitchell's accusations were made, by the Independent Mandan investigations of Prince Maximilian in 1833–34, (Maximilian, vol. 23, pp. 324–334). Catlin was defended strongly by the intelligent fur trader James Kipp, who had

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been with Catlin when he witnessed the ceremony (Kipp, pp. 436–438). 114

Since the days of that historic controversy, the practice of self-torture in tribal sun-dance ceremonies has been reported, on reliable authority, as once characteristic of the Arapaho, Arikara, Assiniboin, Canadian Dakota, Cheyenne, Crow, Gros Ventres, Hidatsa, Oglala Dakota, Plains Cree, Plains Ojibway, Sarcee, Sisseton Dakota, and the three Blackfoot tribes (Spier, pp. 473–475). Furthermore, brief accounts have been published of ceremonial self-torture, witnessed as early as 1805, among the Arikara and Hidatsa by the fur traders Pierre-Antoine Tabeau and Charles Mackenzie (Tabeau, pp. 191–193; Mackenzie, pp. 354–357). 171 175 785

It seems most probable that some Plains tribes practiced forms of self-torture in the period before first white contact. 175 785

Among the Plains Indian tribes of the United States the practice of self-torture was prohibited more than 60 years ago. This ban resulted from the combined opposition of missionaries and the civil and military branches of the Federal Government to such self-imposed cruelties, which tended to excite the Indians, to perpetuate both Indian-white and intertribal hostilities, and to make difficult the process of civilization and Christianization of the Indians. 171 785 657

Published descriptions of self-torture among these tribes have been primarily of two kinds. Some were eye-witness accounts of interested but untrained white observers who not infrequently misinterpreted the purpose of the torture as a ceremony for "making braves." Others were based on the testimony of older Indians who had witnessed the tortures some years earlier but had not experienced torture themselves. Detailed case histories from the mouths of men who had submitted themselves to torture are few and fragmentary in the extensive literature on the sun dance. 114 785

Self-torture survived in the sun dances of the Blood and North Blackfoot Indians of southern Alberta for a few years after its discontinuance among the Plains tribes of this country. In the course of field work on the Blood Reserve in September, 1947, the 785 178 101 115

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writer met two elderly full-bloods who had been tortured in the sun dance of their tribe. They were the last survivors of men of that tribe who had experienced this ordeal, and they were particularly desirous that their torture experiences should be recorded accurately. These narratives by Scraping White (now 81 years old) and Heavy Head (now 78), related to the writer through the interpreter Percy Creighton, provide new and significant information on the procedure of self-torture in the Blood sun dance ceremony and its meaning to those who submitted to it. They help to round out the only published description of the Blood self-torture, that of the missionary John McLean, who witnessed the ceremony prior to 1889.

In the summer of 1889 the Blood medicine lodge was erected on the north bank of the Kootenay River, in southern Alberta. Three young men, Scraping White (then 23 years of age), Tough Bread (now deceased), and Heavy Head (then 20 years old), presented themselves to be tortured.

Scraping White described his experience thus:

> Three of us tortured ourselves in the sun dance that year—Tough Bread, Heavy Head, and I. I was the oldest of the three.
>
> I was on a war party to take horses from the Assiniboine when I made my vow to be tortured. Shortly before the sun went down, when we were in sight of the enemy camp, I turned to the sun and said, "I want good luck. Now I go to the enemy. I want to capture a good horse and go home safely. I'll be tortured this coming sun dance." As soon as it was dark I went into the enemy camp and took two fast horses out of their corral without any of them knowing it. I had good luck and reached home safely.
>
> Then I told my relatives of the vow I had made. Yellow Horn, an older relative, who had been through the torture before, told me, "Put up a sweat lodge for me and I shall look after you." I made the sweat lodge the very next day.
>
> Not long after that the sun dance was held. The torture took place the day after the center pole was raised for the medicine lodge. I was the first one to be tortured. The torture began about noon. Old Yellow Horn cut my breasts with an iron arrowhead and inserted a skewer through the cuts at each breast. These skewers were of serviceberry wood, flattened on both

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sides, thinned toward the ends but not sharpened, and about this long. [Scraping White indicated a distance of about 2 inches between his thumb and forefinger.] Then sinew was wrapped around the ends of the skewers and they were tied, each skewer to a 4-strand plaited rawhide rope. The two ropes were fastened at their far ends to the center pole at its forks. 796 785

I stood up and Yellow Horn told me, "Now you walk up, put your arms around the center pole and pray. Tell sun, now your vow is being fulfilled." I did just as he told me. Then I stepped back. Yellow Horn pulled hard on the rawhide ropes attached to the skewers. Then I danced. I didn't dance long before my flesh gave way and the skewers pulled out. Yellow Horn came to me and cut the skin that had broken. He trimmed it off even. Then he gave me the pieces of skin he had cut away and told me to take them and stick them in the ground at the base of the center pole, saying, "Now sun, I have completed my vow." 796 785 782 [535]

Heavy Head's narrative of his torture experience was still more detailed: 785

There were only two of us, Buffalo Teeth, my partner, and I. We went to war together to take horses. At Medicine Hat we found a small camp of Cree half-breeds. It was night when we saw their camp. It was moonlight. I looked up at the moon and prayed to it, "I shall be tortured at the sun dance if I have good luck and get home safely." Then I stole up to the camp and got one bay that was tied in front of a lodge without any of the enemy waking or seeing me. Buffalo Teeth took a roan. We started back to the Blood camp, traveled three days and three nights with no food other than a black rabbit. We got awfully weak and hungry. 726 721 785

When I reached home I told my story to my father, Water Bull. The old man got up and sang his encouraging song. Then he told me, "My son, you have done something worth doing. You have made a vow that you will be tortured at the sun dance. You must do it this coming sun dance." 785 554 [533] [796]

A few days later I went out to the east point of Belly Butte to fast. While I fasted I dreamed that a sacred person came to me and gave me a drum and certain herbs to use for doctoring. Then I returned home. 781 752

A short time after that the bands began to come together for the sun dance encampment. I prepared myself to go to an old man named Little Bear, a relative of mine, who had been through the torture himself, years before. I 785 796

[p. 168-A]

filled my pipe and took it to him. I gave him the pipe and a buckskin horse, and said, "Here is a horse for you. Keep this pipe too. I want you to look after me in the torture." When I gave him the pipe he put it down and went over to the next lodge. There were two old men there, Green Grass Bull and Red Bead. These men were not related to me, but they were both older than Little Bear, and both had been through the torture. Little Bear asked them to come to his lodge, to take my pipe and pray for me. After they prayed, they told me not to take any food or water the day I was to be tortured.

The day before the torture I ate or drank nothing. Next day I ate or drank nothing until after the torture. However, the three old men gave me some sagebrush to chew.

I was the last of the three Blood Indians to undergo the torture that day. Scraping White, who was the oldest, was first. Then Tough Bread, then I. I was the youngest. Inside the medicine lodge, on the west side of the center pole and north of the weather dancer's arbor, a shelter was built of sticks like a sweat lodge, covered with willow leaves. I went in there before noon of the day of the torture. I was laid on my back with my head pointed north. I was barefoot, and wore only a breechcloth made from a small, red, trade shawl purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company. There was a little bowl of white paint and another of black paint nearby. The three old men painted four black dots, one below the other, under each of my eyes. This was called "tear paint." If I cried the tears would run down there. Then they painted a double row of six black dots on each arm. They painted the symbol of the moon, points up, on my forehead in black. On the outside of each of my legs they painted a double row of six black dots. The rest of my body was painted white, also my face. They took some of the broad-leafed sagebrush from the ground inside the sweat lodge and bound it together, placed a wreath of it around my head, and bands of it around each wrist and ankle.

I was taken from the sweat lodge and laid upon a blanket on the ground at the north side of the center pole with my head to the north, my feet toward the center pole. Other people were told to keep back away from me. Then an old man named Low Horn was brought forward. He counted four of his coups. The three old men, Little Bear, Red Bead, and Green Grass Bull, held me—one at each arm, and one at my head. Red Bead took a sharp, iron arrowhead in his hand, and asked me, "How do you want me to cut them? Thick or thin?" I said, "Thin." (I learned later that this question

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FIG. 1.—Scraping White (left) and Heavy Head (right), two men who were tortured in the Blood sun dance of 1889.

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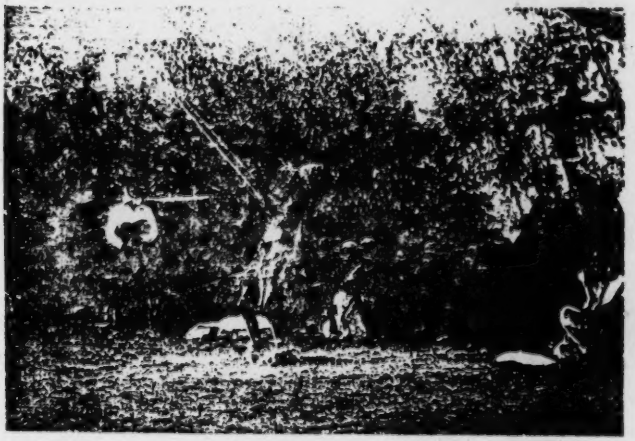

FIG. 2.—An act of self-torture in the Blood sun dance of 1891. Photograph by R. N. Wilson.

was always asked of the man undergoing the torture before his breasts were pierced, and the one doing the cutting always did just the opposite of the young man's request. So when I said "thin," Red Bead knew to make his incisions deep).[2] Red Bead gave four of his own war coups. He made no prayer. Then he pierced my breasts with the sharp arrowhead and inserted a serviceberry stick through each breast. The sticks were not sharp but flattened at the ends. The other two men held my arms as he cut and inserted the sticks. Blood flowed down my chest and legs over the white paint. Then Red Bead pressed the sticks against my body with his hands. They turned me around to face the sun and pierced my back. To the skewers on my back they hung an imitation shield, not so heavy as a war shield. The shield had feathers on it, but I don't remember how it was painted. It belonged to a man named Peninsula.

The ropes were brought out from the center pole and tied to the skewers in my breasts—right side first, then left side. Red Bead then grabbed the ropes and jerked them hard twice. Then he told me, "Now you go to the center pole and pray that your vow will come true." I walked up there. I knew I was supposed to pretend to cry. But oh! I really cried. It hurt so much. Coming back from the center pole I was shouting. Then, before I started to dance, I jerked the shield off my back.

I leaned back and began dancing, facing the center pole. It felt just like the center pole was pulling me toward it. I began to dance from the west toward the doorway of the sun lodge and back. Then, when the skewers did not break loose, the old men realized that the incisions had been made too deep. Red Bead came up and cut the outside of the incisions again so they would break loose. As I started dancing again the left side gave way and I had to continue dancing with only my right side holding. An old man named Strangling Wolf jumped up from the crowd and came toward me shouting. He called out four coups he had counted and jumped on me. The last rope gave way and I fell to the ground.

The three old men came to me and cut the rough pieces of flesh hanging from my breasts off even. They told me to take this flesh that had been trimmed off, and the sagebrush from my head, wrists, and ankles, and place them at the base of the center pole. I did as they told me.

[2] Jenness, pp. 54–5, reported the same contrariness of action on the part of the Sarcee surgeon when the suppliant pleaded for a "thin" cutting.

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Then I took my robe and walked out of the medicine lodge alone. I went to a lonely place and fasted for a night. I wanted to dream. But I couldn't sleep at all because of the pain. At sunrise I prayed to the sun.

Some time after that I saw a man approaching on horseback. He said, "I'm going to take you home right away." He took me up behind him on his horse and rode me slowly back to camp. My breasts were swollen and hurt. The rider's name was Red Crane. He told me of a mix-up that took place at the sun dance over horses stolen from the Gros Ventres.

When I got to my lodge, my mother gave me something to eat. She and my father told me what had happened at the sun dance gathering —a mix-up between the Mounted Police and Indians.[3] I had to stay in the lodge several days. My breasts were so swollen I could hardly move. Indian doctors used herb medicines to take the swelling away and cure my wounds.[4]

The common elements in these two accounts reveal the pattern of the self-torture experience among the Blood Indians more clearly and completely than the brief description of the ordeal previously published by McLean. This experience was initiated by a warrior through a vow to the celestial deities, sun or moon (the latter in Blackfoot belief was sun's wife), very shortly before the man exposed himself to danger. The vow was a simple, direct appeal to the deity for protection and success in the immediate, hazardous undertaking. In return for such aid the petitioner promised to make the self-torture sacrifice in the sun dance lodge of his people. On return home after the successful exploit the pledger made known his vow to his relatives. They helped him to obtain the services of one or more older men who had been through the ordeal and were qualified, therefore, to instruct and care for the young man in the ceremonial fulfillment of his vow. The public cere-

[3] In the summer of 1889, the Mounted Police sought to apprehend Calf Robe, a Blood horse thief, who sought sanctuary in the medicine lodge of his people. The Indians overpowered the police and set Calf Robe free, but there was no bloodshed (Steele, pp. 262–265). This incident serves to verify the year of Scraping White's and Heavy Head's torture.

[4] These narratives follow as closely as possible the words of the interpreter. In a few places details obtained during further questioning of the informants have been inserted.

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mony took place in the sun-dance lodge, about midday of the day following the erection of the center pole. One man was tortured at a time. Each young man's experienced helper or helpers prepared him for the ordeal, pierced his breasts, inserted the wooden skewers, and attached the thongs leading from the crotch of the center pole. They guided his actions by telling him first to embrace the center pole and pray for successful fulfillment of his vow, watched him closely until he freed himself from the ropes, trimmed off the ragged edges of flesh from his breasts and instructed him to place them at the base of the center pole as an offering to the sun. With this act the vow was fulfilled.

Both informants stated that the helpers were always men well advanced in years, rather than men who had been through the torture only a few years earlier. The number of helpers depended primarily on the age of the victim and his relative's confidence in his ability to take the punishment. Younger men generally had more helpers to hold them as the incisions were made. Fasting was not considered obligatory. Scraping White said he was not required to abstain from food on the day prior to the torture. Scraping White's narrative omits mention of the painting of his body in preparation for the torture. However, Heavy Head asserted that all who underwent the torture were painted just as he had been.

Neither Scraping White nor Heavy Head took any active part in the tortures at the sun dance of 1891, the last occurrence of self-torture in the Blood ceremony. They said that four men, Calf Tail, Buckskin Tom, Old Man Owl, and Takes Paint, all now deceased, were tortured in that year. R. N. Wilson, a trader on the Blood Reserve, photographed these torture ceremonies. One of his photographs is reproduced here, through the courtesy of Archdeacon S. H. Middleton, principal of St. Paul's Residential School, on the Blood Reserve, owner of a print from the original glass plate negative. Percy Creighton believed that the Indian shown in the act of torture was Takes Paint.

The Blood Indians were the last Blackfoot tribe, and probably the last tribe of

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Plains Indians to observe the self-torture ceremony. After their 1891 performance of the torture it was prohibited by the Indian Department and the Mounted Police. A year earlier the North Blackfoot had been persuaded to abandon torture (Ann. Rept., pp. 83–84). The Piegan eliminated torture from their sun dances at least 20 years earlier. Weasel Head (born about 1860), for many years a prominent weather dancer in the South Piegan sun dance, told the writer before his death in 1943, that he had never seen the torture performed in the sun dance of his tribe, although he recalled that as a youth he had seen older men who bore the scars of torture. Red Plume (born ante 1850), informed Curtis that he had seen the torture rites in the Piegan sun dance only four times, thrice when a small boy and once when a young man. Each time a single man had submitted to the torture. Red Plume attributed the discontinuance of self-torture in the Piegan sun dance to the warning of a North Piegan weather dancer that "they would die if they gave their bodies to the sun" (Curtis, vol. 6, p. 55). Clark Wissler (p. 262) and Walter McClintock (p. 320) reported the persistence of this belief among the Piegan in the first decade of the present century.

Wissler (p. 263) believed that self-torture had not become thoroughly adjusted to its place in the Piegan sun-dance ceremony at the time it was abandoned. On the other hand, the torture appears to have found much more favor among the neighboring Blood Indians. McLean (p. 236), stated that from two to five men underwent this torture every year in the Blood sun dance. Whereas the Piegan seem to have abandoned torture as a result of native fear and distaste for the ceremony, the Blood continued to practice it until they were compelled by Government authorities to give it up.

Wissler (pp. 263–264) was inclined to credit a Piegan tradition that the Blackfoot tribes borrowed the torture ceremony from the Arapaho. There still exist among the Piegan vague but persistent traditions of a group of Blood Indians who sojourned for a number of years with the Arapaho in the early part of the nineteenth century. Chey-

enne traditions, obtained from elderly men of the Southern Cheyenne nearly half a century ago by George Bird Grinnell and George E. Hyde, tell of a group of Gros Ventres and "Blackfeet" (division not indicated), who joined the Cheyenne and Arapaho in the Black Hills or on the Platte about the year 1826. According to one version of this tradition the "Blackfeet" returned north a few years later (Grinnell, vol. 1, pp. 39–40). Major Culbertson, who was married to a Blood woman, is reported to have found ten lodges of Blood Indians living with the Arapaho, when he attended the Fort Laramie Treaty Council in 1851. "They were unknown to him, and he did not learn how long they had been there or whether they ever returned" (Bradley, Book A, p. 184). These data, and the fact that the Piegan were relatively indifferent to the torture in later years, suggest the possibility that the torture feature was introduced among the Blackfoot tribes by Blood Indians, who may have borrowed it from the Arapaho no earlier than the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

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Spier (p. 491) regarded the self-torture as a nonessential element in the sun-dance ceremony of most Plains tribes. Our evidence certainly supports this conclusion insofar as the Blood sun dance is concerned. Both the torture pledger and his helpers played no necessary part in the sun-dance ceremony. They entered the medicine lodge for the sole purpose of fulfilling the pledger's vow. The Blackfoot tribes have continued their annual sun dances to the present day, with no apparent sense of loss of any essential feature. Now as formerly the sun dance centers about the elaborate ritual prescribed for the fulfillment of the vow of the medicine woman who pledged the ceremony. Her objective was reached with the completion of the medicine lodge, the day before the tortures took place.

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The Blackfoot tribes regarded the torture, such as was endured by Scraping White and Heavy Head, as the most dangerous and severe form of physical sacrifice to the sun. The mutilation of the body by offerings of a finger or bits of flesh from the arms and legs were considered lesser ordeals (Wissler, pp. 263–265). Scraping White

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showed the writer scars on his legs resulting from the sacrifice of pieces of flesh to the sun prior to the year of his torture experience. Nevertheless, the belief of the Piegan that men who submitted to the torture would not live long after they had given their bodies to the sun, appears to have been based upon religious fear rather than the life histories of men who had been tortured. Several of our elderly South Piegan informants recalled having seen older men of the tribe who bore the scars of the torture. The severity of the torture varied with the depth of the incisions. Older men watched the suppliant carefully, and did not permit the torture to be prolonged indefinitely. Even in the case of Heavy Head, whose experience was described by other elderly Blood Indians as the most severe punishment they had witnessed in sun-dance tortures, the performance lasted only a few minutes. His narrative indicates the pain and nervous shock must have been intense. But in the majority of cases it probably did no permanent damage to the individual. Although Scraping White and Heavy Head still bear the scars of their torture, these men appear to be in fair health, active of mind and body, nearly six decades after they expiated their vows to the sun in the Blood medicine lodge in the summer of 1889.

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116 TEXTS--a full set of pages from each processed source, arranged in page order, as a means of establishing the context for any particular slip. Sets are arranged in the numerical order of the sources. See also:

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ETHNOLOGY.—*Stone "Medicine Wheels"—memorials to Blackfoot war chiefs.*

HUGH A. DEMPSEY, Calgary, Alberta.

(Communicated by John C. Ewers.)

121 764 [101] [172] Two stone "medicine wheels," which are still in existence on the Blood Indian Reserve in southern Alberta, Canada, offer excellent examples that the line between archeological and ethnological work is sometimes a fine one. For these two "medicine wheels"—and a third recently inundated by backwaters of St. Mary Dam—are not ancient markers whose significance is lost [124] in antiquity. Rather, they have been constructed within this century, and a summer's field work has revealed the date and ownership of the rings, the reason for their existence, and has enabled interviews to be made with individuals who actually participated in or witnessed their creation.

764 The Blackfoot "medicine wheel" consists of a circle of stones, or "tipi ring," with concentric lines of stones of varying lengths [172] extending away from it in the four cardinal directions. This pattern is similar to those described by Kehoe's informants (1954, pp. 133–34), although it differs from his Lowry, Mont., site which has ten such lines.

342 178 764 The tipi ring itself is common in Blackfoot country and has been used within the past two decades by at least two tribes of this nation (Blood and North Peigan) where the owner wished to follow early customs.

342 764 The tipi rings were aptly described in 1955 by One Gun, an elderly North Blackfoot informant: "The circles of stones were normally used to hold down the edges of the lodges. The old tipis were made of buffalo skins and were much heavier than the canvas ones. They could not be blown away as easily, so stones were able to hold them in place. But when we started to use canvas, we had to use pegs or our tipis would be blown over. Stones were also used between the pegs."

[127] Although many of these tipi rings have been destroyed in cultivated areas, some are still known to exist on the North Blackfoot Reserve in Canada, the Blackfoot Reservation in Montana, and on the Blood Reserve, where the writer has observed well over two dozen in casual traveling.

764 The Blackfoot term for the "medicine

764 wheel" is *atsot-akeeh' tuksin*. The literal translation is: "from all sides" (*atsot*), "a small marker of stones" (*akeeh'*), "for posterity" (*tuksin*). It will be noted that the word merely designates the radiating lines and makes no reference to the tipi ring itself. This conforms with Blackfoot tradition that the lines were merely appendages to existing tipi rings, rather than the whole marker being constructed at one time.

[555] [729] According to informants, "medicine wheels" were used to mark the residence or grave of a warrior chief. There were apparently three such allied uses: for a tipi in which a warrior chief died and was buried; one in which he had been residing at the time of his death but which was not his burial place; and one which was used during his lifetime but not related to his death. Each may be a variation, or they may reveal a change in the use of these markers over the years.

764 173 [115] The earliest reference to a Blackfoot "medicine wheel" known to informants is credited to Bull Back Fat, a Blood chief who died in 1842. But, according to Jack Low Horn, a reliable Blood informant who supplied this data, the marker did not originate with this chief but "was started in the days when our people used dogs instead of horses." The informant told the following story:

> "The use of this sign saved the life of the first Bull Back Fat.[1] The Bloods had been on a raiding party to the south and were returning home. In each camp, Bull Back Fat used these signs around his lodge. A party of enemy Crows discovered one of these camps and saw his marks. They had never seen them before and wondered what they meant, so they began to follow the trail of the Bloods. They found two deserted camps and arrived at the third shortly after the Bloods had left. Bull Back Fat and his wife were a few miles from this camp when they discovered that a colt

[1] There were at least five Blood chiefs named Bull Back Fat during the period 1830-1900 and each is remembered by some characteristic—i.e., the first Bull Back Fat, the short Bull Back Fat, the Bull Back Fat who was buried by women, etc.

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764 173 had been left behind, so they returned to find it. When they came to a point overlooking the camp, the Crows saw the pair and waved to them. Escape was impossible, so Bull Black Fat rode down to meet them. Speaking in sign language, the Crows asked about the meaning of the stones. Bull Back Fat explained that these were used by a great warrior chief who was leading the party of Bloods; but he did not tell them that he was the chief. They became anxious to visit this man and Bull Back Fat agreed to lead them there under a pact of peace, but asked that his people have time to be prepared. He left the Crows and found the new camp where his lodge was placed in readiness for the visitors. When the party arrived, they were shown to Bull Back Fat's tipi. When they entered, they were surprised to meet the same man whom they had seen earlier. It was then they learned who he was and realized they had missed the opportunity of killing a great chief. . . ."

764 According to the informant, other tribes soon learned the meaning of the "medicine wheel" and it served a practical purpose, for the enemy was always hesitant about pursuing a camp which was led by a noted warrior. "Anyone passing one of these markers would know that a great warrior chief had camped there," he commented.

If this at one period was the common Blackfoot use of the "medicine wheel," it evidently underwent a change in the late nomadic period, for most modern informants consider these to be solely memorials or death markers. One Gun stated that "when a chief died, he was left in his tipi. After it had fallen down and rotted, anyone travelling past would know that a chief died there because of the radiating lines." Alternately, Rides at the Door, a Blood informant, said that "any stranger passing such a place would recognize that a chief

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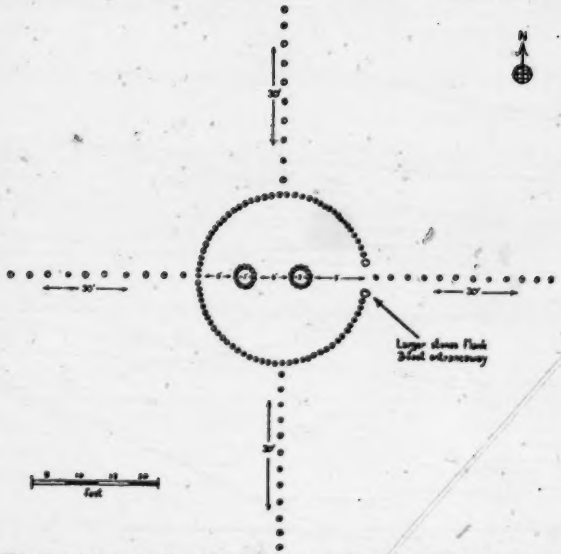

FIG. 1.—The "medicine wheel" of Steel, a noted Blood warrior, is located on the Blood Indian Reserve, southern Alberta, about 3 miles north of Spring Coulee. It is 27 feet in diameter at the circle with four 30-foot radiating lines. There were 77 stones used in the circle portion, and 14 each in the 3-foot fireplaces. This "medicine wheel" was constructed in April 1940, following the death of Steel.

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40: Dempsey H-4,5 (1955) 1956
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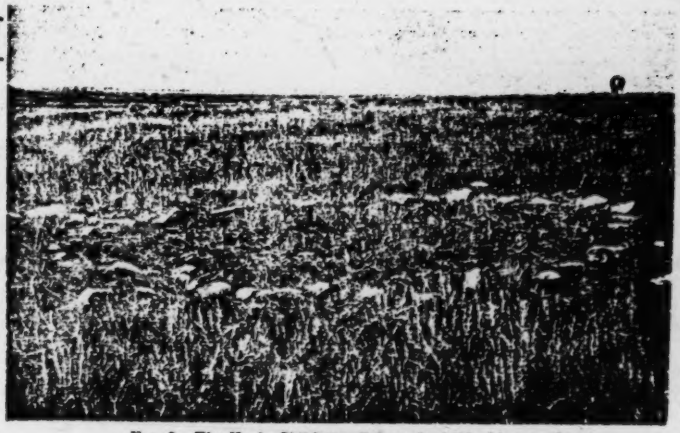

FIG. 2.—The Eagle Child "medicine wheel," looking northeast.

764 had died there, but the body would not be left there."

It is possible that these two distinct lines of thought are the result of Blackfoot mortuary customs. At times, particularly during plagues or when moving camp, a dead person was left in his sewn-up lodge. On other occasions, he was buried in the trees or on a scaffolding on a high hill. This variation possibly affected the use of the "medicine wheel," with the radiating lines being left at the death lodge if it was used, or at the tipi ring if the chief was buried elsewhere.

The Bloods and North Blackfoot know of several "medicine wheels" which were erected for warrior chiefs. Some of these markers are still in existence, but most have been destroyed by the inroads of civilization. One Gun knew of two wheels which he claimed were intact on the North Blackfoot Reserve, east of Calgary. He said that "at Blackfoot Crossing there is one for Little Medicine Pipe, a Blackfoot who died in the smallpox epidemic of 1869-70, and on Arrowwood Creek is one for Bad Head, a Blood chief." Another informant said that Many Spotted Horses, a noted Blood war chief who died in 1884, had a "medicine wheel" on the Blood Reserve near Whoop-

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764 his death and was one of the most influen-
[15] tial men in the nation. An elderly inform-
ant, Mrs. Bruised Head, who was present at the event, provided the following description of the making of his "medicine wheel":

> "I was staying at Red Crow's tipi at the time. He went across the river to round up his horses and, when he didn't return, his wife, Long Time Singer, went to look for him. She found him laying on the gravel at the edge of the river. I saw her crying and we knew what had happened. We all went across with the Red Crow's wagon and brought his body over. Both religious denominations were at the funeral, together with many white people. When it was finished, we started to move camp. But before we left, we placed the markers on the four sides of his tipi ring. Red Crow had used pegs on his tipi, but also had stones between them. When the lodge was removed, the circle of stones was incomplete, so we took rocks from other tipi rings and completed it. Then we placed the four radiating lines. There was no ceremony; several of us in the family did it because it was the custom as far back as the days when we used dogs; they were just the marks of a warrior chief.
>
> "After this, we left the camp site. That night, Bull Horn, a minor chief, camped in the next bottom. He had not heard about Red Crow's death. Next morning he went to the camp site and when he saw the marks around Red Crow's tipi ring he began crying, for he knew that Red Crow was dead."

764 The second example is the Eagle Child
172 wheel which was constructed in 1931 after this man's death. It is located about 150 feet west of his house on the Blood Reserve, and 1½ miles south-west of St. Paul's Anglican School. The tipi ring portion is 12 feet in diameter and contains 54 field stones ranging from four to 12 inches in diameter.
[27] There are no hearth stones. When examined in the summer of 1955, the north and south lines contained six stones, the east line seven stones and the west line four stones. All extended in lines four to six feet in length and, by the spaces, would appear to have been disturbed by cattle or horses.

According to available information, Eagle Child had lived in his house, but moved to

764 his tipi shortly before his death in 1931. The
172 radiating lines were set in place by Francis Eagle Child following his father's death.

The most interesting "medicine wheel," from all aspects, is the memorial to Steel, a great Blood warrior. It is of the most classic design and the fact that it was constructed in 1940, probably makes it the most recent and last such stone marker.

Born in about 1850, Steel was an outstanding fighter against the Crow and Assiniboin and, although he never gained official chieftain status, he was held in this [555] regard by his people. For his exploits, he [354] became the owner of a 30-buffalo tipi and was permitted to have two fireplaces. Because these two points are reflected in his "medicine wheel" they should be briefly explained.

342 The average Blackfoot tipi contained 12
555 to 14 skins (Ewers, 1955, p. 131), but warriors who performed certain brave deeds were permitted to have tipis made of 30 buffalo skins. Because of its size and weight, such a lodge was said by informants to have been divided in half for moving, and was [556] carried on two travois. Therefore, besides fulfilling the warrior requirements, the owner of such a tipi had to be fairly wealthy in horses. Some Bloods who owned these tipis were Seen From Afar, brothers Hind Bull and Fish Child, Packs His Tail, and Holy Sleeps. Naturally, a 30 buffalo tipi was far larger at the base than the average tipis, and this size is immediately evident when inspecting certain tipi rings or "medicine wheels."

555 If a Blackfoot owner of a 30 buffalo tipi
354 carried his bravery and heroism to an even greater degree, he might become one of the select few to possess twin fireplaces. To gain this envied prize, a warrior had to perform some outstanding *coup* of a double nature. For example, an early Blood chief, Big White Child, knocked two enemy from the same horse—one from each side. Steel, according to an informant, gained twin fireplaces when he killed two Crow Indians in a singularly brave action.

[778] The fireplace nearest the doorway was apparently used for everyday purposes, while the one to the west was reserved for

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555 [778] burning incense associated with a medicine pipe held by twin fireplace owners.

[354] Informants knew of only five Bloods who had possessed both 30 buffalo tipis and twin fireplaces. These were the first Bull Back Fat, Tail Feathers Coming Over the Hill, Big White Child, Many Spotted Horses, and Steel. Even Seen From Afar, remembered by the Bloods as their greatest chief, had not performed the "dual" exploits necessary to gain this honor.

764 [555] [729] Therefore, Steel's final memorial—a 30 buffalo tipi ring, with twin fireplaces, and flanked with four radiating lines—would appear to be the greatest tribute that could be paid a Blackfoot warrior chief.

[777] [515] In his later life, Steel was a progressive Indian who lived in a log cabin, built corrals, and owned cattle and horses. Early in 1940, shortly before his death, he pitched his large canvas tipi (of 30 buffalo size) a short distance south of his home, in preparation for a meeting of the Horn Society—a secret organization which guides the religious life of the reserve. Although he used pegs, he also obtained stones to hold the canvas in place. Following the meeting, Steel showed his son, Bob, how to lay out the four directional lines.

Steel died at Standoff on April 7, 1940, and was buried on a hill near the Belly Buttes. His son, assisted by his sister, Mrs. Laurie Plume, then completed the "medicine wheel" in accordance with his father's last wishes.

[555] [729] "The lines signify that he was a brave man, a leader who had been to war," stated his daughter. "It was Steel's wish to have this done as a proper tribute to a warrior chief." She added that, if he had not been entitled to it, the elders of the tribe would have quickly ordered the stones removed, as they were jealous of undeserved honors.

764 172 The Steel "medicine wheel" is located on the Laurie Plume farm, three miles north of Spring Coulee and about three-quarters of a mile from St. Mary River.

The tipi ring portion is 27 feet in diameter (compared to Eagle Child's 12-foot ring) and contains 77 field stones. There is a three-foot entrance to the east which is flanked by two larger stones. The concentric lines are all 30 feet in length, with the stones

764 172 evenly spaced. The north and west lines contain 10 stones while the south and east lines contain 12 each.

The double fireplaces are both three feet in diameter and each contains 14 stones. The everyday fireplace is nine feet from the east entrance, while the ceremonial fireplace is six feet in either direction from the west edge of the ring and from the other fireplace.

[127] There is no doubt that this "medicine wheel" was carefully prepared and, when it was visited in 1955, it was overgrown with grass but was reverently treasured by Mr. and Mrs. Plume. Because the tall grass could not be cleared away, it was impossible to properly photograph the entire ring.

Evidence that Steel did not vary the general size of the circle, fireplaces or entrance, was obtained when two informants stated that the first twin fireplace tipi ring constructed by Steel was still in existence in the Standoff area. By checking winter counts, the date of this ring was set at 1885.

When found after considerable searching, this tipi ring was seen to be almost identical with the "medicine wheel," with the exception that it did not have the radiating lines. It had the same diameter, the entranceway was the same size, and there was only slight variation in the size of one fireplace. The only major difference was that the fireplaces appeared to be closer to the east entrance by some 3 feet. There was no doubt that this ring was older than the "medicine wheel" as all stones were deeply imbedded in the soil, some being level with the surface.

There was one point about "medicine wheels" upon which all informants were in unanimous agreement: the radiating lines had no religious or symbolical significance. [801] The number "four" is a sacred one among the Blackfoot and often occurs in religious ceremonies and traditional tales. But all agreed that no such symbolism applied here or, if it ever had, all knowledge of it is forgotten. The reply of informant Rides at the Door is typical: "There is no symbolical meaning to the four lines; they just denote his status as a warrior chief."

764 Upon existing evidence, it would appear that the use of Blackfoot "medicine wheels"

40: Dempsey H-4,5 (1955) 1956
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764 are relatively recent. Informants knew of only two such markers which they could not immediately identify. One was near Red Crow's wheel and was thought to have been much older, while the other was on Sun Dial Hill (Kehoe, 1954, p. 134) and is recorded only through the Geological Survey of 1882-83-84. However, the title, *Onoka-katzi* used by surveyor G. M. Dawson to describe the site, likely means "Elk Shirt" (*Ponoka-sokaxsin*), which was believed by informants to have been the name of a mid-nineteenth century chief of the North Blackfoot.

Because it has been possible only to study "medicine wheels" located on the Blood Reserve and interview informants from the Blackfoot nation, no attempt has been made to carry this study beyond the region [171] of the stated territory. "Medicine wheels," of a type, have been mentioned at Lowry, Mont., by Kehoe, and in the Big Horn Mountains east of Lovell, Wyo., by Mulloy, (1954, pp. 54–55), but further research would be necessary to ascertain if there is any relationship between these, and the relatively recent markers of the Blackfoot. Also field work among the Crow, Assiniboin, Gros Ventre, or other Northern Plains Indians might determine if this custom was familiar to tribes other than the Blackfoot.

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[Information about the "stone medicine wheel" monuments to dead warrior chiefs is filed principally in Category 764.]